DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 264 584 CS 209 488

AUTHOR Monkarsh, Frances Celniker
TITLE The Nature of the Writing Process: A Review of the Literature.
PUB DATE Aug 85
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Prewriting; Revision (Written Composition); Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes; *Writing Research

ABSTRACT

Significant findings in recent research concentrate on how writing is taught in school and how it might best be taught. Research on writing over the past fifteen years has shifted emphasis from product to process. The writing process can be divided into three stages: prewriting, writing, and rewriting. Prewriting (everything that takes place before the first draft) includes choosing a topic, an audience and a form, as well as reading, talking, freewriting, and thinking about a topic. The production of the first draft involves everything the writer does from the time first words are put on paper until all drafts are completed. Positive teacher attitude is a most important influence at this stage. The revision process covers simple editing to substantially reformulating whole texts, and can occur before, during, and after composing a draft. Student conferences with teachers and peers are a good means of encouraging revision and making students feel less threatened by it. (A summary of research observations is included). (EL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

FD264584

The Nature of the Writing Process: A Review of the Literature

Frances Celniker Monkarsh
Assistant Principal
Kadimah School
Buffalo, New York
August, 1985

CS209 488

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Frances Celniker

Monkarsh

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Introduction

Writing research is a quite recent development in educational research. Reading research, in contrast, is at least 50 to 100 years ahead of writing research. Funding for writing research, though greater than a few years ago, is a fraction of the funding for reading. In his report to the Ford Foundation, Donald Graves (1978) noted that teacher education courses all favored reading over writing by a large ratio. Teacher preparation still puts little stress on writing, and many experienced teachers feel uncomfortable with their level of expertise. Education journals and the mass media are full of complaints about illiteracy in general and the "writing problem" in particular.

Graves has suggested that the quality of writing is problematic partly because students are being taught primarily to read rather than to write. Even when they are taught "writing," guided practice in actual writing is neglected.

Recently, however, researchers have turned their attention to writing. They are beginning to explore the nature of composing processes and how people learn to write. Efforts such as the Bay Area Writing Project and the Vermont Writing Program have influenced greater interest in the research that relates to the writing process. Teachers have

begun to explore the context of the writing process through their own writing. They now can view what children do within the framework of practicing the craft themselves.

This paper discusses significant findings employed in recent research that concentrate on the nature of writing as it occurs in school, and about how writing might best be taught.

The Writing Process - An Overview

Over the past fifteen years research on writing has shifted emphasis from product to process. A diverse group of researchers including Janet Emig, Donald Graves, Lucy M. Calkins, James Britton, Shirley Brice Heath and Susan Sowers began to examine writing as it occurred in natural settings. Their reports included generous portions of children's language and the informed observations of the researchers. A typical and well-known participant-observer research project is the two year study by Donald Graves (1975). In the Graves' project, children were observed before, during, and after writing sessions, and the researchers kept detailed records of the students' writing process. This observation design called for sitting with the children in the classroom, keeping running records of observations and interviews, and keeping samples of the children's writing in a case-study type of approach to learning more about what happens in children's writing. Graves' study showed that beginning writers follow a process but that it varies with their individuality and their writing style. According to Graves (1983), the writing process has a driving force called voice. Technically, voice is not a process component but it underlies every part of the process: rehearsal, topic, choice, composing, reading, rewriting. Rehearsal refers to the preparation for

composing and can take the form of daydreaming, sketching, making lists of words, outlining, reading, or conversing.

Emig (1971) designed a case study to investigate the composing process of twelfth grade students. She analyzed think-aloud protocals as they completed several writing tasks., Emig concluded that there are two possible preludes to the writing act: prewriting and planning. Prewriting is defined as the period of time between perception of an idea and the actual formulation of words and phrases. According to Emig, one of the most important phases in the writing process is prewriting. Planning, which can occur several times, is defined as any oral and written organization before or during the writing process. Flower and Hayes (1980) have described the "act of composing as a set of distinguishable processes which the writer must orchestrate in the act of writing." They used the term "stage model" for the concept of a prewriting-writing-rewriting process in which each stage is completed in an invariable sequence. Odell (1974) measured the effect of instruction in prewriting using a college English class. He found that all the essays of the students in the experimental group showed significant increase in the use of prewriting operations. This implies that pre-writing activities can affect student writing.

Golden (1980) compared writing with speaking noting that young children develop a sense of the functions of language in social situations at an early age. This skill, when applied

to writing, can serve to develop writing ability more naturally. Alvin Burrows (1970) and Lucy M. Calkins (1983), have noted that in the primary grades oral discussion of experiences is as important in the development of the ability to write as actual writing itself.

To help teachers understand what does actually happen in writing, we need to observe the process carefully. George H. Henry (1980) suggests that such observing gives us "views of the English classroom as it flows through time." He points out that not all writing time is spent in putting words on paper.

The Stages of the Writing Process

When writing is studied as a process, it is apparent that the process has distinct stages. Donald Murray (1982) has detailed what he calls the writing process "cycle of craft." It involves seven skills that writers utilize while moving through the phases of the writing process. These skills are discovering a subject, sensing an audience, searching for specifics, creating a design, writing, developing a critical eye, and re-writing. Oral language processing with the teacher and other writers is central to a student's progression through each of these stages. At the simplest level, the writing process can be divided into three stages: prewriting, writing, and rewriting.

Defining Prewriting

Prewriting is everything that takes place before the first draft. It is the time during which information is gathered and ideas played with. In prewriting, the writer focuses on a topic, spots an audience, chooses a form which may carry his subject to his audience. Prewriting may include reading, talking, and simply thinking about a topic.

The term 'rehearsing', first used by Donald Graves (1978) after observation of children writing, more accurately describes the activities which precede a completed draft. According to Graves, conscious rehearsal accompanies the decision to write. During this stage of the writing process the writer prepares himself or herself for writing before knowing for sure that there will be writing. Graves points out that productive writers are "in a state of rehearsal all the time." Rehearsal begins with drawing (when children need to see what they mean) just prior to the act of writing. Daily writing leads to an increase in effective rehearsal. When children write regularly, they 'rehearse' while watching TV, riding a bike, in various places. Just knowing they will write every day enables them to think about writing when they are not actually writing.

Authorities such as Donald Murray (1982) and Lucy Calkins (1983) have recommended that teachers guide children first to talk about their topics and what they want to do with them. Oral language processing that precedes and occurs during writing

is an important foundation of the writing process approach to writing instruction. Prewriting allows students to begin letting their piece of writing grow, change, develop throughout the writing process. Murray states that the "teacher has to restrain himself or herself from providing a content." Students should be encouraged to find their own subjects, forms, and language. According to Calkins, children become involved in writing when they write about ideas that really matter to them. Rehearsal is not useful, according to Graves, if a child has to wait for teacher assigned topics. He observed that for writers who compose daily, other topics come to them in the midst of writing about another subject, especially if they know they can exercise control over their choices.

One way to help students feel comfortable in their writing is freewriting. According to Elbow (1973), freewriting is discovering what a writer wants to say. If students can't think of anything to say, they merely write what they can see in front of them. Elbow believes that freewriting stimulates natural fluency and it allows children to discover that they are the source of writing.

Graves (1983) states that "the very act of writing itself, through heightening meaning and perception, prepares us both consciously and unconsciously to see more possibilities for writing subjects." It is the responsibility of the student to find his own subject, to explore his own world with his own language.

Drafting and the Writing Environment

After pre-writing, the next step is the production of the first draft. This writing stage is when the topic is developed on paper. According to Graves (1978), it refers to everything a writer does from the time first words are put on paper until all drafts are completed. Teaching the writing process means leading students to recognize that drafting is a temporary and exploratory stage. The draft a writer puts together must be tested and redesigned before it is finished.

The case studies made by Graves, Calkins and Sowers of children in Atkinson, New Hampshire and reported in articles in Language Arts (1979-1980), offered convincing evidence that children can and do write at any earlier age than teachers have expected. The amount of detail in the observations reported illustrates how the children's personalities and their developmental stage influenced their writing behavior. Children may not always have a clear idea of what they will write about. They may discover a better story while writing than they would have planned ahead of time. James Moffett (1968) has urged that children learn to write for audiences of four relationships: reflection (intrapersonal purpose), conversation (interpersonal), correspondence, and publication. A successful writing curriculum, as Goodman and Goodman (1983) point out, is one that "builds on personal writing, builds the functions of interpersonal writing, and helps pupils to find frequent real

purposes for such writing with real audiences." Alvina Burrows (1972) supports the statements of Moffett and Calkins with the observation that there must be real, live audiences for the child's work. The responses of other readers and listeners are of critical importance.

There is actually little literature that contradicts the concept of the writing process. Lapate (1978) observed that attention to the writing process alone will not assure growth of writing skills. The writing environment affects a student's ability to progress through the stages in the writing process. For student writing, teachers can provide an environment in which writing is fun and an exciting experience. According to Calkins (1983), children need permission to explore, experiment, and make errors. They need to know that they can correct their errors when they reread their drafts or allow the teacher to edit.

The writings of Burrows (1966), Moffett (1968), and Britton (1972) point out the influence of the positive teacher. Teacher attitude, which is audibly and visibly reflected in teacher words and actions, is a most important influence for a successful writing program for children. Based on his research, Graves (1978) recommends that an appropriate teacher view of children's writing is that of "unfinished pieces." If student efforts are considered "on the way" rather than incorrect, quantity and quality of writing might well be expected. Britton also encourages teachers not to sacrifice the role of listener

and reader to that of error-spotter and corrector. "Children in school should write about what matters to them to someone who matters to them" (1972, p. 53). The researcher implies that teachers must help children see that writing is more than adding words and ideas together to fulfill an assignment. From the very first writing experiences, the teacher plays a crucial role in supplying positive reinforcement. Positive attitudes can be conveyed by spoken words of encouragement to each writer and by allocating time for sharing writing, or by publishing student work in a class booklet. Drafting is each writer's tentative response to the writing situation, and the response is individual, for each student and for the teacher who writes with the class.

The Nature of Revision

Revision follows drafting in the progression from pre-writing to completion in the writing process. Ann Humes (1983) states that revising occurs throughout the composing of a piece of discourse. Revising is behavior that entails changing one's mind about the content and structure of the discourse as well as changing actual, translated text. "This subprocess covers a range of behavior from simple editing to substantially re-formulating whole texts, and these behaviors occur before, during, and after composing a draft." The research implies that teachers who demonstrate how continually and naturally they revise and who supply guidance for student revising can help

children with their writing skills. If teachers are to help children control their writing, they need to know what children see, and the process and order of their seeing. According to Graves the process of revision is "seeing again." Student writers need guidance in learning how to look below surface correctness into the content, into what the writing says.

Conferencing with teachers and peers is advocated throughout current literature on the writing process as means of encouraging revision and making students feel less threatened by it. It occurs when teachers talk individually to students about their writing. Graves (1983) emphasizes the importance of "helping children speak" during the conference (p. 97) by arranging the physical setting so that the child does not feel intimidated, by waiting for children to answer questions, by structuring the conference so that its structure will be predictable for the child, by listening to the child, and by looking for the child's potentials. Positive feedback is an important part of the writing conference. Donald Graves (1978) recommends that after several pieces of work have been completed the teacher and student select the best pieces in the student's writing folder. Students often gain insight through this procedure into what worked best for them. Sowers (1982) emphasizes that the teacher must ask questions that the child can answer. "Ask questions that you want students to ask themselves, so that they may have individual conferences with themselves." It is also important to ask students what questions or comments helped them revise.

Conferencing can also be carried out by small peer groups. Peer response groups are designed to provide support for writers during the writing process. Participating in the group allows the writer both to receive response and to play the role of the responder. This activity helps the student writer to better understand what that role entails. Thompson (1981) gives evidence that if students are formally trained to evaluate one another's writing, their own writing improves. Teacher guidance is needed throughout the process of learning how to respond helpfully to other students' writing. Calkins (1980) reported that to revise, most student writers must have an audience. They need someone to listen to and look at what they have written and to respond to what it says.

The literature generally suggests that capacity for revision grows with maturity. Writing purpose and a student's developing concept of audience may lead to a logical need for revising some pieces of writing. According to Murray (1982) the writer finds that instead of looking back to the previous draft, trying to clarify what has been written, the writer is actually looking ahead to the next draft to see what must be added or cut. This process of discovering meaning--rehearsing, drafting, revising--repeated again and again is the way the writer's meaning is found and made clear.

Summary of Research Observations

The review of the literature suggests that:

-Children learn to write by writing--even very young children whose knowledge of spelling is limited can write.

-The student finds his own subject. Children should write from their own experiences.

-When children feel a need or a desire to write for a specific purpose or audience, they write more effectively.

-There must be time for the writing process to take place and time for it to end.

-Students are individuals who must explore the writing process in their own way.

-Writing purpose and real audiences lead children to a logical need for revising pieces of writing.

-Journal writing is a favorite activity of children.

-Oral language processing of ideas should precede writing and occur during writing.

-The student should have the opportunity to write all the drafts necessary for him/her to discover what he/she has to say on a particular subject.

-Teacher and peer conference with the writer are effective means of helping children see what other choices could be made. It helps children process their writing orally and progress from first drafts in order to discover the writer's own meaning.

-Positive teacher attitude is the single most important ingredient in a successful writing program for children. The teacher should respect and respond to his students--to help them see that writing is a process, not a product.

Conclusions

Current research on the nature of writing reveals that in recent years, a number of researchers have turned their attention away from the parts of the writing product toward the steps in the writing process. These studies have focused intensively on a few writers. The findings are often highly detailed and there is the possible problem of distinguishing the significant from the trivial. However, it is apparent that when writing is studied as a process, the process has distinct stages. At the simplest level, these include prewriting, writing, and editing. Recognition of these distinct stages of the writing process does provide a useful perspective for elementary grade teachers in examining classroom practice.

These studies have produced important findings about the composing process. In their various ways they are creating new knowledge about the nature of writing as it occurs in school,

and about how writing might best be taught. To help all writers become good writers, researchers must continue to investigate the composing process. More information will enable teacher to help students when they get "bogged down" in those processes. Teachers have begun to understand the nature and context of the writing process through their own writing. They now can study what children do within the framework of practicing writing themselves. Classroom teachers are more aware of the meaning of rehearsal (prewriting), revising, and development of skills related to publication.

Graves (1980) states that research must be broadened to include an active role by the teacher. Teachers need to write and develop their own skills in the writing process. They need to write in order to understand the craft they teach. According to Graves, the focus of future research ought to include closer looks at children while they are writing, and get to know the real potential of both children and teachers.

Bibliography

Applebee, Arthur. Writing and Reasoning. Review of Educational Research, Vol. 54, Fall 1984.

Britton, J. "Writing to Learn and Learning to Write." Humanity of English. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1972.

Burrows, Alvina T. "Children's Writing and Children's Growth." Elementary English 28 (1962):205-208.

_____. Teaching Composition. Washington, D.C.: Department of Classroom Teachers of the National Education Association, 1966.

Calkins, Lucy M. Lessons From a Child. Exeter, N.H.: Heineman, 1983.

_____. "Research Update: Children earn the Writer's Craft." Language Arts 57 (1980):207-213.

Elbow, Peter. Writing Without Teachers. New York: Ocford Press, 1973.

Emig, Janet. The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders. Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1977.

Goodman, K. and Goodman, Y. "Reading and Writing Relationships: Pragmatic Functions." Language Arts May 1983.

Graves, Donald H. "A New Look at Writing Research." Language Arts, December 1980, pp. 913-919.

_____. Balance the Basics: Let Them Write. New York: Ford Foundation, 1978.

_____ and Murray, D. "Revision: In the Writer's Workshop and In the Classroom." Journal of Education, 1982.

_____. Writing: Teachers and Children at Work. Exeter, New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books, 1983.

Golden, J. "The Writer's Side: Writing for a Purpose and an Audience." Language Arts, 57, 1980.

Humes, Ann. "Research on the Composing Process." Review of Educational Research, 53, (Summer 1983):201-216.

Lopate, Philip. "Helping Young Children Start to Write." Research on Composing. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1978.

Moffett, James. Teaching the Universe of Discourse. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968.

Murray, Drnald M. Learning by Teaching. Montclair, New Jersey: Boynton Cook Publishers, Inc., 1982.

_____. "Teach the Motivating Force of Revision." English Journal 67 (1978):56-60.

Odell, L. "Measuring the Effect of Instruction in Pre-Writing. Research in the Teaching of English, 1974, 8, 228-240.

Sowers, Susan. "Reflect, Expand, Select: Three Responses in the Writing Conference." Understanding Writing, edited by T. Newkirk, N. Atwell. Chelmsford, Mass.: Northeast Regional Exchange, Inc., 1982.

Thompson, Richard. "Peer Grading: Some Promising Advantages for Composition Research in the Classroom." Research in the Teaching of English, 1981, 15, 172-174.